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Journal

Academy of Management Journal, 35(4)

ISSN

0001-4273

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Publication Date

1992-10-01

DOI

10.2307/256313

Peer reviewed

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The Academy of Management Journal, Volume 35, Issue 4 (Oct., 1992), 699-738.

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ACQUIRING ORGANIZATIONAL LEGITIMACY THROUGH ILLEGITIMATE ACTIONS: A MARRIAGE OF INSTITUTIONAL AND IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT THEORIES

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This article links institutional and impression management perspectives in a process model of how controversial and possibly unlawful actions of members of organizations can lead to endorsement and support from key constituencies. This model is grounded in interview, archival, and observational data concerning eight illegitimate actions attributed to members of two social movement organizations. We found that institutional conformity and decoupling illegitimate activities from legitimate structures facilitated spokespersons' efforts to use impression management tactics that shifted attention away from the controversial actions and toward the socially desirable goals endorsed by broader constituencies. As a result, these organizations used publicity generated by illegitimate actions to obtain endorsement and support from those constituencies. We discuss the implications of the model for other kinds of organizations and derive testable propositions. We also consider implications for institutional and impression management theories.

Organizations that seek to be recognized by a wide set of groups and individuals that will provide endorsement and support sometimes encounter a vexing predicament. If those organizations adhere closely to societal norms, they are unlikely to repel outside groups and individuals that can provide endorsement and support. Yet, because conformity produces organizations that are not distinct from most others, such organizations may not be noticed by crucial outsiders. Conversely, if such organizations openly violate societal norms, they are more likely to be noticed, but outsiders are unlikely to provide endorsement and support to organizations that defy

We wish to thank Thomas D'Aunno, Blake Ashforth, Jan Kees Elsbach, D. Charles Galunic, Linda Ginzler, Thomas J. Kosnik, Douglas McAdam, John Meyer, Keith Murnighan, Walter Powell, Mark Snyder, Andrew Van de Ven, Scott Wilder, and Mayer Zald for helping us to develop the ideas in this work. We are especially grateful to W. Richard Scott and the members of his doctoral seminar for providing some painful but useful comments on an earlier version of this article. We also wish to thank the Stanford Center for Organizations Research and Stanford University's Office of Technology Licensing Research Incentive Fund for supporting this study.

widely accepted standards for behavior. In this study, we considered how two radical social movement organizations acquired legitimacy in the face of this predicament.

The notion that an organization will be rewarded for having a legitimate reputation is a ubiquitous theme in organizational theory (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Lipskey, 1968; Zald, 1978). Legitimacy is conferred when stakeholders—that is, internal and external audiences affected by organizational outcomes—endorse and support an organization's goals and activities. And an organization can be described as legitimate when it is endorsed and supported by a segment of society large enough to ensure its effectiveness and survival (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978: 194). Pfeffer and Salancik pointed out that, because an organization need only be endorsed and supported by some rather than all segments of society, it can remain legitimate in the face of external attacks. Nonetheless, acquiring and maintaining legitimacy are chronic difficulties for most organizations, regardless of how widely recognized they are or how widely supported they have been in the past.

The expectations of current and potential organizational participants, as well as the expectations of powerful external actors, about what constitutes legitimate means and ends are often conflicting, vague, and in flux (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). If key actors become dissatisfied with an organization's actions, they may retract endorsements of organizational goals or activities. Dissatisfaction may also lead such actors to reduce the quantity or quality of their participation in the organization or to demand more resources in exchange for continuing the same level of participation (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

Institutional theorists have contended that organizations facing conflicting, inconsistent demands about what structures and practices they ought to use can maintain legitimacy by adopting designs that mask or distract attention from controversial core activities that may be unacceptable to some key constituencies. Meyer and Rowan (1977) proposed, for example, that by adopting visible structures that conform to social norms and by decoupling those structures from less acceptable core activities or goals, organizations can enhance the legitimacy conferred by powerful actors, even when their core practices and goals conflict with those desired by such actors. In addition, by using socially acceptable procedures to carry out controversial activities, organizations can maintain the impression that they are rational and legitimate even when such activities clash with social norms or organizational goals (Scott, 1987).

Institutional theory provides a useful but incomplete view of how organizations cope with conflicting, inconsistent demands. In addition to adopting visible and institutionalized structures and practices that mask or distract attention from controversial activities, organizations use spokespersons to provide positive interpretations of controversial actions (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978: 194). These interpretations include using impression management tactics (Schlenker, 1980) to portray structures and actions in ways intended to garner endorsement and support. Thus, a greater understanding

of how organizations acquire and protect legitimacy may be gained by blending institutional and impression management perspectives.

Existing writings hint that such an integration might be useful. Meyer and Rowan (1977) discussed how institutionalized structures and practices can be used in the accounts that managers provide to external constituencies. For example, they observed that using econometric analysis to justify organizational projects is an institutional norm, and that "such analyses can also provide rational accountings after failures occur: managers whose plans have failed can demonstrate to investors, stockholders, and superiors that procedures were prudent and that decisions were made by rational means" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977: 350).

This example implies that using institutionalized practices helps managers justify their actions and bolster their excuses. Justifications and excuses are impression management techniques (Tedeschi & Reiss, 1981). Yet past work has not explicitly woven together institutional and impression management perspectives. This article is an initial step toward such an integration. We propose a process model (Mohr, 1982) describing how institutional conformity of structures and procedures and the decoupling of illegitimate activities from legitimate structures set the stage for the use of impression management tactics.

We induced this model from a study of two radical social movement organizations, Earth First! and the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). Radical social movement organizations call for fundamental social change and exhibit rhetoric and tactics that "are widely viewed as unconventional, inappropriate, or illegitimate" and "are widely perceived as threatening" (Haines, 1988: 197). The model we developed is based on interviews, observations, and archival data about eight widely publicized actions attributed to members of Earth First! and ACT UP. We found that such illegitimate activities create legitimacy dilemmas for these organizations. On the one hand, culturally illegitimate activities can provoke negative comments and attacks that drive away members and jeopardize outside support. On the other hand, the resulting publicity can bolster an organization's reputation within the very narrow segments of society that endorse such controversial actions. Furthermore, such publicity, if managed correctly, can indirectly lead the organization to acquire legitimacy from those relatively broad segments of society that support its culturally acceptable goals. As a result, the survival and effectiveness of such organizations hinge partly on violating widely held norms to gain endorsement and support from a sufficiently large segment of society. Our study suggests that the two organizations we studied accomplished this delicate balancing act by combining organizational design features identified by institutional theorists with verbal accounts identified by impression management theorists.¹

¹ The perspective proposed here is related to, but distinct from, past work by social movement theorists on the antecedents of legitimacy for organizations, including sympathetic by-
(continued)

Following the logic of induction, we first describe the methods used in this research and then explicate the process theory grounded in these data. This process theory is most apt to generalize to other radical social movement organizations. But this research also has broader implications. Thus, we then consider implications for more traditional organizations, for developing testable propositions, and for refining institutional and impression management theories.

METHODS

Earth First! and ACT UP

Earth First! and the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) were studied in the fall of 1990. We chose these organizations because they relied on illegitimate actions to gain recognition and achieve goals, because the media attention they received provided extensive data, and because they could be classified as organizations. We must note, however, that Earth First! literature asserts that it is not an organization and thus can have no members. Yet, we consider Earth First! to be an organization and Earth First!ers to be its members because it has many trappings of an organization. Its fundraising, media, and direct action committees indicate that a differentiated social structure is used to achieve collective goals. Mailing lists of people affiliated with Earth First! are maintained, and most people on such lists describe themselves as Earth First!ers. And local chapters operate under the Earth First! banner. ACT UP, which describes itself as an organization, has these same trappings. We considered studying other collections of social activists, like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), but chose not to because it was less clear that they were organizations. For example, most local groups loosely affiliated with PETA did not carry the PETA name, and members did not describe themselves as PETA members.

Earth First! was founded in 1980. There were over 15,000 Earth First!ers in more than 100 local groups in the United States and abroad in the period

stander publics (Turner, 1969), the presence of extremists (Haines, 1988), and even a highly educated audience (Olsen, 1968). Social movement theorists have also defined some dilemmas for legitimacy in such organizations. For example, Piven and Cloward (1977) argued that legitimacy gained through support from outside constituents constrains and delimits the impact of social protest and that social movement leaders should focus on organizational goals without compromise. On the other hand, Lipskey (1968) proposed that social movement organizations divide up public roles so as to simultaneously appeal to opposing audiences, including the media, organization members, reference publics, and the targets of protest.

Although these theorists have considered structural solutions to legitimacy dilemmas, they have not explicitly used data about organizations to induct institutional or impression management theory, nor have they posited the integration of structural strategies with impression management tactics. Furthermore, although we refer to theory and research on social movement organizations where pertinent, and the addition of impression management theory is a contribution to the literature on such organizations, this study was intended primarily as a contribution to the more general literature on organizational theory.

studied. Earth First!'s espoused mission is to preserve and expand wilderness areas and to protect animals and plants in these areas. Members advocate the philosophy of "deep ecology," in which the human role in ecosystems is seen as no more or less important than that of trees. Earth First!'s philosophy of action is summarized by their credo: "No compromise in defense of mother earth!" and is manifested in "monkeywrenching" (Manes, 1990: 175), or performing visible and potentially unlawful actions designed to slow the destruction of the wilderness. As Earth First!'s founder, Dave Foreman, put it: "We're sticking a wrench in the system, we're slowing it down, we're thwarting it, we're kicking it in the face!" (Manes, 1990: 189). Monkeywrenching includes tree-spiking—driving metal spikes into live trees and marking the trees to warn loggers that cutting the tree is dangerous—sabotaging logging machinery, by, for instance, pouring sugar into bulldozer gas tanks, and blocking logging roads.² These actions have led others to label Earth First! a radical and even a terrorist organization.

ACT UP, an organization devoted to activism on AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), was founded in 1987. It had 20,000 members in over 50 local groups in the United States and abroad in the period studied. A large portion of its members are from the gay and lesbian communities. Members are "committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis" (ACT UP, 1990: 1). Their demands include increasing government funds for AIDS research, education, and treatment, opening access to experimental drugs, lowering treatment costs, and the participation of people with AIDS in decisions on drug trials. ACT UP also seeks to end hostile and discriminatory actions against people with AIDS and to improve their self-image. The visible and possibly unlawful direct actions used by ACT UP members include occupying the offices of drug company executives and government officials, disrupting church services, and defacing property with stickers and red paint symbolizing the blood of AIDS casualties.

The members of both organizations studied are from diverse ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes. Both organizations are composed of loosely coupled, independently governed, local chapters guided by locally determined goals and tactics. These chapters use consensus decision making to determine group actions. Both organizations maintain local and national newsletters. Financial support for both comes mostly from donations, and sales of T-shirts, bumper stickers, and buttons.

Data Sources

Semistructured interviews. Seven informants were interviewed from five Earth First! chapters, and nine were interviewed from two ACT UP

² The lyrics of this Earth First! ditty summarize the spirit and content of monkeywrenching:

You grab a wrench, I'll get the Karo syrup,
Picks and shovels and wire cutters too,
Iron filings and sugar for the gas tank,
Then I'll show you what we're gonna do.

chapters. We contacted two Earth First!ers who declined to be interviewed. All informants from ACT UP whom we invited to be interviewed chose to do so. The Earth First! informants had been members for from three months to ten years. The ACT UP informants had been members for from six months to three years. At least one informant from each organization had been an active member since its founding.

We interviewed at least one member of each organization in the following categories: (1) a very active member engaged in a high degree of direct action, (2) a very active member engaged in a low degree of direct action, and (3) a moderately active member engaged in a low degree of direct action. We sought to interview informants from each category to obtain a range of views on these organizations' actions and legitimacy. We used initial phone conversations with potential informants to fill out the categories, asking them how active they were in the organization and how much they participated in direct action events. When we needed more informants for a given category, we asked if they knew someone in that category who might talk to us. We stopped interviewing additional informants for each organization when we began hearing the same information repeated again and again, following Glaser and Strauss's concept of "theoretical saturation" (1967: 61–62).

Informants were open and helpful during interviews. But ACT UP members more readily disclosed information about illegitimate events. This openness may have occurred because ACT UP members did not use methods, like tree-spiking, that could endanger others. ACT UP members may also have been more open because many carried the virus widely considered to cause AIDS, and some suffered AIDS symptoms. As a result, they believed that their only choice was to "fight or die."

The semistructured interview was based on a working framework developed prior to the data collection. We initially used a pilot interview form and then edited it to reflect refinements in our framework and to reduce repetition. The final interview consisted of 41 open-ended questions. We also pursued unexpected, but interesting, issues that arose because this was an inductive study. All but three interviews were recorded and transcribed; detailed notes were taken during all interviews. Interviews averaged 90 minutes and ranged from 20 minutes to three hours.

We began the interviews by discouraging informants from revealing any previously unknown information about illegal activities that they or other members might have taken. The Human Subjects Committee at our university encouraged us to provide this warning because, as Van Maanen put it: "There is absolutely no legal protection guaranteed to the social scientist on the grounds of research confidentiality" (1983: 245). As a result, despite our resolve to protect informants' confidentiality, it was important to warn informants that we could be forced to testify against them.

Questions concerned organizational history, use of direct action and its effect on an organization's reputation, organizational structure, and informants' experiences with and feelings about the organization and its actions. Questions focused on four widely reported and controversial actions that

had been attributed to members of each organization. We asked informants how those events affected the organization and its reputation. They were also asked about their interactions with and feelings about outside groups, including corporations, government agencies, law enforcement agencies, other activist groups, the courts, the general public, the media, and politicians. We were able to cover all prepared questions in most interviews. It was not always necessary to ask each question because an informant's answers to prior questions often addressed subsequent questions. Moreover, because we had had advance warning that one informant could speak to us for only about 20 minutes, we prepared a brief interview that focused on the controversial events.

Records data. These data included newspaper and magazine articles covering organizational history, videotapes of television programs, books by members, and a complete set of newsletters for Earth First! These sources discussed the illegitimate events we examined in detail. Articles from local (e.g., the *San Jose Mercury News*) and national (e.g., the *New York Times*) newspapers, as well as local television news, provided information about media reactions to events. Interviews in popular (e.g., *Newsweek*) and environmental (e.g., *Buzzworm*) magazines provided information about the long-term consequences of the events. Books by prominent members of the two organizations provided insights into nuances of the events, especially the reactions of organizational leaders and spokespersons (Foreman, 1991; Kramer, 1989; Manes, 1990).

Observation of ACT UP meetings. The first author attended three weekly meetings of an ACT UP chapter. These three-hour meetings were open to the public. A rotating coordinator planned the agenda for each meeting and led discussion. All people attending a meeting (including the first author) introduced themselves and stated their affiliations. These meetings provided valuable information about organizational structure, past events, and strategies for upcoming events.

Illegitimate Events

Data analyzed from the three sources focused on four illegitimate events attributed to Earth First!ers and four illegitimate events attributed to ACT UP members. These events were discussed in detail by informants and were the subject of extensive discussion in media sources. Table 1 provides a brief description of each event.

We chose events that appeared, at least initially, to be likely to have negative consequences for an organization's legitimacy. Each event involved one or more illegitimate actions that were attributed to organization members, and each violated widely held social norms about how organizations and their members ought to behave.

DATA ANALYSIS

We used an iterative approach of traveling back and forth between the data, pertinent literature, and emerging theory to develop our model. This

TABLE 1
Illegitimate Events Attributed to Members of ACT UP and Earth First!

Organization	Illegitimate Event	Date
ACT UP	Disruption of filming of an episode of the "Midnight Caller" TV show that depicted a bisexual man with AIDS who was deliberately infecting women	10/20/88
	Golden Gate Bridge shutdown by AIDS activists that was largely attributed to ACT UP	1/31/89
	Disruption of a service at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City; some activists were accused of desecrating communion wafers	12/10/89
	Shouting down of the secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Louis Sullivan, at the Sixth International Conference on AIDS in San Francisco	6/24/90
	A tree-spiking, commonly attributed to Earth First!; a lumber worker's saw blade hit the spike, which seriously injured him	5/8/87
Earth First!	National Day of Protest against the U.S. Forest Service; included monkeywrenching, office takeovers, and demonstrations	4/21/88
	Arrest of four Earth First! members, caught in an alleged rehearsal run for the sabotage of a nuclear facility in Arizona	5/30/89
	Arrest of Earth First! members for blocking road and tree-sitting during Redwood Summer protests in northern California	6/90–9/90

method draws on descriptions of how to generate grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Miles and Huberman (1984), and Eisenhardt (1989). We made hundreds of comparisons between the emerging model and the data and used those comparisons to guide judgment calls about the evolving model. We met frequently to discuss the emerging framework before, during, and after the data gathering. Following Miles's (1979) recommendation, we focused our early meetings on developing a rough working framework to bring clarity and focus to the questions asked informants, information gathered from records, and notes taken at meetings. The most important decisions we made at this juncture were to focus on a small set of direct action events attributed to members of each organization, on how the interpretation of each event was managed, and on the implications of each event for the organization.

Our meetings during the field study focused on adjusting plans about what data should be gathered to ground the emerging framework and on refining the framework. After the interviews had been completed, but not transcribed or analyzed, we reviewed the literatures on social movement organizations, institutional theory, impression management, and legitimacy. We then developed a substantially more explicit version of our working

framework. It emphasized that many of the actions that led to legitimacy for these radical organizations also could threaten their legitimacy. This early model focused on how decoupling illegitimate actions from more legitimate structures enabled spokespersons to claim the organization wasn't blame-worthy.

We then made more systematic comparisons between the data and emerging model. The approach used for comparing evidence across events was based on Miles and Huberman's (1984) methods for identifying similarities across sites and events. Our analysis of the three data sources indicated that, in addition to decoupling strategies, displays of institutional conformity were associated with illegitimate events. We also observed that the accounts used by spokespersons often referred to and were logically dependent on decoupling and institutional conformity.

Our decision to focus on the processes following specific illegitimate events was the key turning point at this juncture. We developed four tables, or "displays" (Miles & Huberman, 1984), to document the extent to which elements of the model could be grounded in each data source. Constructing these displays entailed reviewing evidence from all three data sources pertinent to each of the eight illegitimate events. We constantly tinkered with the model to align it with new evidence we encountered and with insights that we had as we constructed the displays and wrote the associated text. The displays provide useful information about the empirical grounding of the model. Nonetheless, like any other means of reducing and showing qualitative data in tables, they cannot convey the richness of the data.

Media sources and informant descriptions were examined to obtain data about how the sequence of events unfolded after each of the eight illegitimate events. We developed a time line for each event to capture information about the order in which central elements in the model were evident in reporters' observations, organizational spokespersons' statements, and informants' descriptions. Although there was variation in how rapidly or slowly subsequent events unfolded after each focal event, we found that the order in which events unfolded was fairly consistent across the eight examples. Early versions of the sequence were refined as a result of these analyses.

In addition, for each event, we counted and dated all mentions of criticism and of endorsement and support from organizational stakeholders in three mainstream newspapers that covered the events closely: the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *San Francisco Chronicle*. This analysis was conducted to provide evidence about differences between initial and delayed reactions to these events in mainstream media sources. We combined information from these three newspapers with evidence from media sources that provided less complete and consistent coverage (e.g., the *San Jose Mercury*) and from more biased environmental and AIDS newsletters that only provided endorsement and support. Together, the sources revealed reactions to the events from environmental and AIDS activists, as well as from government officials, politicians, corporations, and religious leaders. As a result

of this analysis, we found not only reasonable grounding for the proposed elements, but also evidence to ground and shape the development of a process model.

A PROCESS MODEL OF HOW MEMBERS' ILLEGITIMATE ACTIONS CAN LEAD TO THE ACQUISITION OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEGITIMACY

Figure 1 summarizes the process model that resulted from our analysis of the eight illegitimate actions attributed to members of ACT UP and Earth First!³ The model focuses on the media's representation of illegitimate events because television, radio, magazine, newspaper, and newsletter reports were the primary avenues through which these social movement organizations communicated to external audiences and received support or criticism from such audiences. As a result, media reports facilitated and revealed the processes ACT UP and Earth First! used to gain legitimacy and provided evidence about the reactions to such processes from stakeholders, including government officials, politicians, corporate spokespersons, and the general public.

The first step in the process model is an illegitimate action by organization members that generates media attention. Initial media reports commonly contain criticisms of the organizations associated with an event. On December 10, 1989, for example, 111 ACT UP members were arrested when they disrupted mass at St. Patrick's cathedral in New York City. Cardinal O'Connor denounced the noisy protest immediately (Associated Press, 1989). The second step occurs when media representatives encounter two design features of an organization: institutional conformity and decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Institutional conformity involves displaying visible organizational structures and practices that are isomorphic with those of

³ The proposed model fits Mohr's (1982) definition of a process theory, not that of a variance theory. First, it tells a story about how the outcome of acquired legitimacy comes about. It does not seek to explain variation in organizational legitimacy. Second, it comprises discrete events and states, not variables. For example, the decoupling of legitimate structures from illegitimate actions and structures is a state rather than an independent or intervening variable. Similarly, acquired organizational legitimacy is a state rather than a dependent variable. If this were a variance theory, the model would focus on predictor variables, such as degree of decoupling, and on dependent variables, such as degree of legitimacy. Third, as in a story, the order of events in a process theory is always essential. For example, justifications and defenses of innocence must occur before enhancements and entitlements in the model. In contrast, variance theories are often less, or not at all, concerned with the causal ordering of variables. Fourth, each event or state in the model is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the outcome to occur. For example, the occurrence of an illegitimate activity is a necessary step in the sequence of events through which legitimacy is acquired, but it alone does not lead to legitimacy. We propose that the illegitimate activity marks the beginning of a probabilistic process that may lead to the acquisition of legitimacy. In contrast, if this were a variance theory, and we proposed that the occurrence (compared to the absence) of illegitimate actions predicted legitimacy, we would have viewed this categorical variable as an "efficient cause" necessary and sufficient to bring about the acquisition of legitimacy.

FIGURE 1
A Process Model of How Illegitimate Actions by Members of Radical Social Movement Organizations Can Ultimately Lead to Acquired Organizational Legitimacy

legitimate organizations in an institutional environment. This conformity implies that the organization and its spokespersons are credible, rational, and legitimate. Thus, on December 10, 1989, ACT UP spokespersons from the New York chapter claimed that the St. Patrick's Cathedral protest was designed to be nonviolent and peaceful and that the event was well publicized in advance to warn churchgoers (Reilly, 1989).

Decoupling involves separating legitimate organizational structures and practices from members' illegitimate actions. It is achieved through the use of independent affinity groups or anonymous individuals who carry out illegitimate actions but are not formally linked to an organization. Decoupling also protects, and may enhance, organizational legitimacy by allowing spokespersons to distance the organization and its legitimate goals from the illegitimate actions of members or subgroups of members. On December 11, 1989, spokespersons for San Francisco ACT UP chapters announced that the St. Patrick's Cathedral protest was an independent action by the New York chapter and had been carried out without their approval (Associated Press, 1989).

Institutional conformity and decoupling set the stage for impression management used in the third step. Institutional conformity and decoupling increase the overall credibility of spokespersons' interpretation and pave the way for two specific impression management tactics: defenses of innocence and justifications. Defenses of innocence are claims that one is not responsible for an event or that the event did not occur (Schlenker, 1980). Spokespersons can defend their organization's innocence by asserting that it did not endorse the illegitimate action—citing decoupling—and thus isn't responsible. Justifications are claims that an event was not "bad, wrong, inappropriate, or unwelcome" (Tedeschi & Reiss, 1981: 7) because of the positive outcomes it led to or the extreme circumstances it was performed under. Institutional conformity makes more plausible justifications that shift attention away from the socially undesirable actions of a few members and toward the socially desirable goals of all members. For example, spokespersons may claim that experts endorsed the action or that members tried normative and legitimate procedures before resorting to illegitimate actions. Thus, on December 17, 1989, gay and lesbian community spokespersons claimed that the St. Patrick's Cathedral action was necessary because peaceful negotiations with church officials had not produced satisfactory changes in their policy toward safe sex and AIDS (Hunter & Servalan, 1989).

Defenses of innocence and justifications shift attention away from negative aspects of an event and toward positive aspects of the event and the organization considered responsible, setting the stage for "enhancements" and "entitlings" used in the model's fourth step. Enhancements are attempts to improve the perceived merit of an event (Tedeschi & Reiss, 1981). Spokespersons typically emphasize the progress made toward socially desirable goals as a result of illegitimate actions. Entitlings are attempts to gain credit for a desirable event (Tedeschi & Reiss, 1981). Spokespersons may assert that the organization deserves credit for the action because of the socially desir-

able goals that it achieved. On December 25, 1989, a journalist knowledgeable about AIDS claimed that ACT UP had made profound changes in drug policies, and an ACT UP spokesperson took credit for these changes, claiming that his organization would continue to "take charge" of the situation (Shilts, 1989).

Acquiring organizational legitimacy is the fifth and final step. It results from the influence of both design features and impression management tactics. Design features allow an organization to attain credibility as rational and gain distance from members' illegitimate actions. Defenses of innocence and justifications extend this distance and shift attention away from illegitimate means and toward legitimate ends. Enhancements and entitlings draw further attention to these legitimate ends and lead to endorsement and support from the fairly broad segments of society that may support the organization's goals. Thus, three weeks after the St. Patrick's Cathedral action, a January 3, 1990, *New York Times* article called ACT UP "effective" in changing drug policies and reported endorsements from the New York City health commissioner and the director of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Disease (DeParle, 1990).

We explicate this model and the evidence that guided its development below.

Step 1: Illegitimate Action

The performance of an illegitimate act by an organization member or members is the first step in the model. There was evidence that members of ACT UP or Earth First! had carried out all eight actions intentionally, although many of the actions were not endorsed by all members or chapters of these organizations. And many of the actions have not been unequivocally linked to ACT UP or Earth First! members. But all have been attributed to ACT UP or Earth First! members and all received at least local endorsement by members of these organizations. For example, the disruption of the Louis Sullivan speech at the Sixth Annual International Conference on AIDS involved extensive planning by members of ACT UP and included their setting up an elaborate media center to communicate with journalists from across the country (Tuller, 1990). Similarly, the Redwood Summer protests planned and carried out by Earth First! chapters were timed to raise awareness prior to a California election in which several environmental propositions were on the ballot.

Illegitimate actions of this kind can provide media recognition for social movement organizations and their goals. Media recognition is essential for organizations that are challenging social norms and attempting to influence public opinion (Oberschall, 1973). Media recognition is most easily gained through large-scale or dramatic actions that portray the associated organization as a credible "player" in the protest movement (Gamson, 1990). The resulting publicity may lead a wider segment of society to know about the organization, creating a potentially larger segment that can provide endorsement and support. Thus, ACT UP and Earth First! members frequently as-

serted that illegitimate actions led to media reports of their organization's goals. A member's letter to the *Earth First!* journal asserted that the tree-spiking incident resulted in such attention:

The bottom line here is that as a result of all this unfavorable coverage regarding spiking, people in the West Coast are acutely aware of the crisis that exists with our forests, and our role in trying to prevent it (Johnson, 1987: 7).

An *Earth First!*er we interviewed remarked:

The major result of ecotage has been to raise the stakes and raise the issues that were being ignored, and in a sense, sensationalizing issues in a way the media would pay attention to. You fire a torpedo and you have your banner hanging on the torpedo.

Similarly, an ACT UP member summarized the impact of the Louis Sullivan disruption:

We get our message out in the media and we do it in such a way that it's colorful, it's creative, it's confrontational, it's tense. And it has all the ingredients that they love. That the media loves, that the T.V. camera loves, and politicians hate to be confronted with.

Yet illegitimate actions create a dilemma because such violations of social norms can damage legitimacy. Controversial actions may drive away current and potential members, jeopardize endorsement and support from outside constituencies, and provide ammunition for adversaries who seek to undermine an organization's reputation. Theorists have contended that conformity to institutional norms about acceptable organizational behavior is essential for attaining organizational legitimacy (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Damaging property and blocking roads clearly violates such norms. Backlash to illegitimate actions can range from harassment and loss of public support to arrests and covert action by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI; Gamson, 1990). Thus, organizations with members that use illegitimate actions can gain recognition among a broad segment of society that can provide endorsement and support. But these organizations also risk developing a negative image that can lead to reduced endorsement and support. We next describe how ACT UP and *Earth First!* appeared to accentuate the benefits of illegitimate actions by using a blend of design features and impression management tactics.

Step 2: Signs of Institutional Conformity and Decoupling

Figure 1 shows that after organization members carry out an illegitimate action, the media encounter organization structures and procedures that conform to institutional norms and structures that separate the formal organization from members' illegitimate actions. Spokespersons highlight

these structures and procedures to convey that their organization is rational, credible, and legitimate. Table 2 indicates that, for all eight events studied, the media encountered institutional conformity and decoupling.

Institutional conformity. By conforming to institutionally defined norms about how to organize, organizations may obtain legitimacy. As Meyer and Rowan wrote:

Vocabularies of structure that are isomorphic with institutional rules provide prudent, rational, and legitimate accounts. Organizations described in legitimated vocabularies are assumed to be oriented to collectively defined, and often collectively mandated ends. . . . On the other hand, organizations that omit environmentally legitimated elements of structure or create unique structures lack acceptable legitimated accounts of their activities. Such organizations are more vulnerable to claims that they are negligent, irrational, or unnecessary (1977: 349).

ACT UP and Earth First! conformed to such institutionalized rules, specifically through structural conformity, procedural conformity, and personnel conformity (Scott, 1987).

First, structural conformity entails adopting widely used organization charts, departments, and job classifications. For example, ACT UP had separate media committees that produced news releases, made press contacts, and worked closely with other committees. Because they had close links with the media, such committees were usually the first contacted by the press after an illegitimate action. For example, after the "Midnight Caller" filming disruption, a media committee held press conferences and voiced demands in concert with several other AIDS activist groups. Similarly, Earth First! often assigned a credible spokesperson to an action or had a media committee set up to provide information about it. Thus, Earth First! co-founder Mike Roselle was assigned to talk to the press after the tree-spiking incident. An informant told us:

Mike Roselle was actually in transit and called in and heard that it had happened and ended up stopping at a phone booth and calling up the media from the phone booth. And he, at that time, was one of the key spokespersons in the Bay Area.

These credible spokespersons and media committees conveyed to outsiders that their organizations had normative structures for distributing information that were much like presidential press departments and corporate public relations departments.

Second, procedural conformity entails adopting "institutionally defined technologies specifying means-ends chains an organization is to follow in order to realize desired objectives" (Scott, 1987: 196). These organizations achieved procedural conformity by carrying out illegitimate actions in a professional or normative manner. For example, ACT UP tried peaceful ne-

TABLE 2
Cross-event Evidence of Institutional Conformity and Decoupling^a

a. Evidence		
Events	Institutional Conformity	Decoupling
ACT UP		
Disruption of "Midnight Caller" filming	i, R	r
Golden Gate Bridge shut-down	i, R	I, R
Disruption at St. Patrick's Cathedral	i	I, r
Disruption of Louis Sullivan's speech at AIDS conference	R	I, m
Earth First!		
Tree-spiking that led to injury of lumber worker	I, r	I, R
Day of National Protest against the U.S. Forest Service	i, R	i, r
Alleged rehearsal run for nuclear plant sabotage	r	r
Redwood Summer protests and monkeywrenching	i, R	i, R
b. Examples		
Organizations	Institutional Conformity	Decoupling
ACT UP	ACT UP's extensive use of negotiations with TV producers prior to the disruption of the "Midnight Caller" filming and use of press conferences after protests to voice demands	The Golden Gate Bridge action was performed by a separate affinity group, SANOE, created especially for this action
Earth First!	Earth First! spokespersons expressed sympathy for an injured worker following the tree-spiking incident; stated that they advocated marking all spiked trees and thus doubted an Earth First!er was responsible for the incident	Earth First! spokesperson asserted that tree-spiking was done by individual Earth First!ers acting alone and not as part of an organized group

^a I = strong evidence from interviews, i = modest evidence from interviews; R = strong evidence for records data, r = modest evidence from records data; M = strong evidence from organizational meetings, m = modest evidence from organizational meetings.

gotiations with the producers of "Midnight Caller" before resorting to more confrontational tactics.⁴ Similarly, Earth First! publications advocated carrying out tree-spiking in a standardized manner that protected loggers from physical harm. All spiked trees were to be clearly marked and timber companies were to be notified of areas that had been spiked. This procedural conformity led an informant to comment about the spike that injured a timber worker:

I don't think Earth First! is responsible for that spike. That spike wasn't a typical Earth First! sort of spiking. The people in Earth First! who spike tend to do it in the way that Dave Foreman said to do it in *Eco-defense*, marking the tree and notifying all the proper authorities.

Third, personnel conformity entails filling roles with members that have qualifications, education, and certification that are isomorphic with the institutional environment. For ACT UP and Earth First!, such credible personnel included expert members—wildlife experts, AIDS experts, lobbyists—who bolstered organizational legitimacy by providing informed opinions about AIDS or environmental issues. As a result, when outsiders interacted with the organization, they spoke with members who were credible experts.

These three kinds of institutional conformity protected ACT UP and Earth First!'s legitimacy because they signaled that the organizations were prudent and rational. Moreover, as explained later, such conformity indirectly influenced legitimacy by implying that organizational spokespersons were prudent and rational, increasing the credibility of their impression management tactics. Thus, spokespersons often highlighted institutional conformity in their accounts of illegitimate actions.

Decoupling strategies. Although institutional conformity in structures and procedures signaled that ACT UP and Earth First! were rational and credible, it would have been difficult for these organizations to gain legitimacy with a sufficiently broad segment of society to ensure survival if they had been linked too strongly to members' illegitimate actions. To deal with this problem, organization spokespersons decoupled legitimate structures and procedures from members' illegitimate actions. In this way, the legitimate structures could exist without interfering with members' controversial activities. As Meyer and Rowan noted, "Decoupling enables organizations to maintain standardized, legitimating, formal structures while their activities vary in response to practical considerations" (1977: 357).

The ability of these organizations to decouple illegitimate actions from

⁴ Earth First! did not usually engage in legitimate actions prior to carrying out illegitimate actions because a primary justification for their actions was that other environmental groups had been using legitimate actions for years without success. Thus, they argued that legitimate predecessors to their actions had already been carried out by other groups.

legitimate structures and still maintain their identities as organizations was due partly to the loose coupling within and between the local chapters. Weick (1976) defined loosely coupled systems as those in which component entities are responsive to each other but do not hold any important variables in common and are able to maintain their own identities. Both ACT UP and Earth First! appeared to fit this definition. Individual chapters of both organizations could take stands that the other chapters or organization leaders did not support. In addition, within local chapters, special interest groups existed, concerned, for instance, with women's issues, animal rights issues, or people of color issues, that dictated their own agendas and tactics and required no endorsement from the larger organizations. As a result, loose coupling was an enduring structural feature that made the periodic decoupling of members' actions from these organizations easier to accomplish and explain.

Members of both ACT UP and Earth First! decoupled illegitimate actions from formal organizational structures by performing these actions as anonymous individuals or as part of "affinity groups," or temporary, independent groups of individuals, that operated under names other than ACT UP or Earth First! Five of the eight illegitimate actions we examined were carried out by individuals or affinity groups. Other actions were decoupled by claims that individual chapters had carried them out without national endorsement. In one instance, a group of ACT UP members, along with other AIDS activists, formed an affinity group called Stop AIDS Now or Else (SANOE) to shut down the Golden Gate Bridge. This arrangement allowed them to carry out illegitimate actions without directly linking them to ACT UP. As one informant put it,

A group like ACT UP that has public meetings couldn't plan something like that. There was no other way to do it but to form a whole different group. That way, the whole group [i.e., ACT UP] can say that, if an affinity group did it, that group is responsible.

A published report also indicated that:

SANOE recruits by invitation only, and requires the total trust and secrecy of its members. . . . Each SANOE action is performed by an independent chapter, although the same people, coincidentally enough, seem to appear. The chapter usually disbands after its titled action (Whiting, 1990: B3).

Other actions carried out by specialized subgroups included the Louis Sullivan disruption, the alleged nuclear plant sabotage, and some actions during the Redwood Summer protests. Tree-spiking was usually carried out by individuals. One informant asserted that individuals did most monkey-

wrenching without notifying the organization, and that Earth First!ers wanted it that way.⁵

Spokespersons often highlighted such decoupling in their efforts to protect their organization's image. Earth First! founder Dave Foreman defended his organization by claiming that Earth First! was not responsible for the tree-spiking incident. He asserted:

I'm sure that individual Earth First!ers have spiked trees in California, but they have been doing it as individuals, not as an organized group (Champion, 1987: 1).

Foreman went on to justify the event:

It's unfortunate this worker was injured . . . but the real destruction and injury is being perpetrated by Louisiana-Pacific and the Forest Service in liquidating old growth forests (Champion, 1987: 1).

These examples suggest that, in addition to separating a formal organization from members' illegitimate actions, decoupling sets the stage for spokespersons to use impression management techniques, such as defenses of innocence and justifications, that attenuate the negative meaning of the actions. The success of these impression management tactics may reflect, in part, the success of institutional conformity and decoupling in improving the credibility of the organization and in distancing it from illegitimate events. We describe these tactics in detail next.

Step 3: Spokespersons Use Defenses of Innocence and Justifications

As Figure 1 indicates, after the media contacted Earth First! or ACT UP about an illegitimate event, spokespersons provided interpretations portraying the event and organization in a positive light. These interpretations are impression management tactics (Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi & Reiss, 1981), defined as efforts to attenuate the negative meaning and accentuate the positive meaning of events linked to an actor. Actors facing predicaments use these tactics in "situations in which events have undesirable implications for the identity-relevant images actors have claimed or desire to claim in front of real or imagined audiences" (Schlenker, 1980: 125).

The eight actions examined here created predicaments for ACT UP and Earth First! These threats to organizational reputation included the public

⁵ Moreover, Earth First! spokespersons also used a tactic closely related to decoupling to avoid collective responsibility for individual actions. Even though, as we documented above, Earth First! had numerous organizational trappings, spokespersons routinely claimed that because Earth First! was a movement rather than an organization, it had no members and thus couldn't be held responsible for the actions of any individuals. Thus, rather than just claiming that the particular action was decoupled from the organization, spokespersons claimed that no actions could be linked to the organization because it didn't exist.

outrage after the Louis Sullivan disruption and the tree-spiking incident. Actors facing predicaments use "accounts," or explanations, to improve their public image (Scott & Lyman, 1968; Schlenker, 1980). Table 3 shows that ACT UP and Earth First! spokespersons routinely used two types of accounts: defenses of innocence and justifications.

Defenses of innocence. These accounts were attempts to reduce or eliminate an organization's construed responsibility for an event and included defenses of noncausation ("it wasn't my fault") and defenses of nonoccurrence ("it really didn't happen") (Schlenker, 1980). ACT UP and Earth First! relied most heavily on defenses of noncausation because the decoupling of structures from illegitimate events enabled spokespersons to claim that the organization was not responsible.

Thus, as previously mentioned, Earth First! spokespersons used claims of noncausation after the tree-spiking incident because the action was carried out by anonymous individuals and was not formally endorsed by Earth First! Furthermore, spokespersons claimed that the lack of procedural conformity in the incident indicated that Earth First!ers were not responsible:

Earth First! representatives replied to the charge by denying responsibility for the spiking, noting that environmentalist tree spikers always inform timber companies about their spiking activities, the point being not to harm workers but to prevent logging. There had been no notification in the Cloverdale incident, and, moreover, the spiked tree was a second-growth redwood, not virgin timber of the type Earth First! seeks to protect (Manes, 1990: 11).

ACT UP used a defense of noncausation in the Golden Gate Bridge shutdown. Spokespersons asserted that SANOE, a separate group, was responsible. They also refuted claims that the disruption of the Louis Sullivan speech was a racist act by emphasizing that a People of Color Caucus led the action. One informant argued,

That was a major media faux pas. The media screwed up badly because a national People of Color Caucus started the disruption and the media never let that out. All the media showed was white people attacking a black. A lot of people of color thought we were racists and I directly blame the media.

This incident also had elements of a defense of nonoccurrence, because ACT UP asserted that the reported racist action did not, in fact, take place.

In sum, both Earth First! and ACT UP spokespersons used defenses of innocence to distance the formal organizations from illegitimate actions and thereby protect their organizations' legitimacy. In addition, spokespersons from both organizations used references to decoupling and institutional conformity to bolster the credibility of these defenses of innocence.

Justifications. These accounts are "attempts to minimize or deny the undesirable nature of a predicament-creating event" (Schlenker, 1980: 137).

TABLE 3
Cross-event Evidence of Impression Management^a

a. Evidence		Impression Management Strategies			
Events	Defenses of Innocence	Justifications	Entitlings	Enhancements	
ACT UP					
Disruption of “Midnight Caller” filming	r	R, i	R	R, i	
Golden Gate Bridge shutdown	I	I, R	R	I, R	
Disruption at St. Patrick’s Cathedral	i	I	i	I, r	
Disruption of Louis Sullivan’s speech at AIDS conference	I, m	R	I	I, R	
Earth First!					
Tree-spiking that led to injury of lumber worker	I, R	R	R	I, R	
Day of National Protest against the U.S. Forest Service		R	I, r	i, R	
Alleged rehearsal run for nuclear plant sabotage	I, R	R	i, R	I, R	
Redwood Summer protests and monkeywrenching		R	I, R	I, R	
b. Examples		Impression Management Strategies			
Event	Defenses of Innocence	Justifications	Entitlings	Enhancements	
Earth First! tree-spiking incident	Claims that lumber firms withheld evidence to make Earth First! look more guilty and that lumber firms planted the spike	Justifying tree-spiking as the only means left to meet the challenge of “ecocide”	Claims that the modest environmental reforms gained by mainstream environmentalists were the result of publicity from monkey-wrenching	Pointing to interviews with the injured mill worker, in which he agreed with Earth First!’s demands to end clear-cutting	

^a I = strong evidence from interviews, i = modest evidence from interviews; R = strong evidence from records data, r = modest evidence from records data; M = strong evidence from organizational meetings, m = modest evidence from organizational meetings.

ACT UP and Earth First! spokespersons minimized or denied the negativity of illegitimate events by claiming they were not as negative as they seemed, that other legitimate actors had performed or endorsed similar actions, and most often, that the ends justified the means. Thus, when Earth First! was criticized for spiking trees, spokespersons asserted that spiking only hurt ruthless corporations, that these actions were similar to the Boston Tea Party, and that a 1,000-year-old tree was worth more than timber company profits. Spokesperson Mike Roselle argued,

We're getting down to the last trees. The actions we take now have to be effective, because we're not going to get a second chance (Diringer, 1989a: A8).

Similarly, ACT UP spokespersons justified the "Midnight Caller" disruption as necessary for preventing violence against people with AIDS:

The whole vigilante tone of the film will lead to the death of our people (Walsh, 1988: A6).

Another ACT UP spokesperson commented:

We're not trying, at any time, to not allow freedom of speech. We only have objections when "freedom of speech" can cause genocide, prejudice, or violence against any community (Marquart, 1988a: 7).

Radical tactics may also be justified if earlier attempts at orderly settlements were unsuccessful (Gillespie, 1983). ACT UP justified its disruption of the "Midnight Caller" filming as the only option left after negotiations with the producers had failed. ACT UP spokespersons said they had been misled about changes in the script and that the producers refused to delete references to irresponsible sexual behavior, which "angered activists who said the gay community has acted responsibly and altered their behavior to avoid infecting themselves and others" (White, 1988: 20). Thus, ACT UP's use of procedural conformity—using legitimate tactics before resorting to illegitimate ones—helped spokespersons to justify illegitimate actions.

In sum, illegitimate actions by ACT UP and Earth First! members were justified as necessary to save human lives and the life of the planet since all previous actions had failed. Justifications of this kind, which shift attention from means to ends, are especially useful for organizations that pursue culturally acceptable goals but use illegitimate actions to achieve them. Furthermore, by shifting attention to the positive ends achieved by such actions, justifications set the stage for enhancements and entitlings.

Step 4: Spokespersons Use Enhancements and Entitlings

Although they used justifications and defenses of innocence to reduce the negative meaning of illegitimate events and to protect organizational legitimacy, spokespersons turned to enhancements and entitlings to high-

light the positive changes brought about by the illegitimate actions and to claim credit for these changes. Table 3 indicates that ACT UP and Earth First! spokespersons routinely used these two impression management tactics to present events and the people responsible for them in a positive light.

Enhancements. Spokespersons tried to enhance members' illegitimate actions by asserting that those actions ultimately benefited the larger society. ACT UP claimed that their protests were responsible for lowering the prices of drugs used by AIDS patients and that actions like the Louis Sullivan disruption increased access to experimental drugs for all people with AIDS. Similarly, Earth First! spokespersons claimed to have helped the entire environmental movement by making other environmental groups look less radical.⁶ They also claimed to have improved the earth for all people by preserving irreplaceable forests. As Earth First! lawyer and spokesperson Gerry Spence said of the alleged nuclear plant sabotage:

The FBI acted as if [it was] dealing with the most dangerous, violent terrorists that the country's ever known. And what we're really dealing with is ordinary, decent human beings who are trying to call the attention of America to the fact that the earth is dying (Manes, 1990: 195).

Assertions that illegitimate actions created awareness and education were also common enhancements. Earth First! spokespersons claimed that environmental issues would be absent from the front pages if not for non-keywrenching. One informant noted about the tree-spiking incident:

It gave us a chance to say "That [action] was done wrong. If it would have been done right, it wouldn't have been a danger to people." We could say, "You know, there are other things you can do to help save forests." It also gave us a chance to talk [to the media] about the issue of why somebody might have gone out and spiked a tree. It gave us a chance to say, "Hey, there are only 4 percent of the redwoods left."

Entitlements. Extending Tedeschi and Reiss's (1981) definition to the organizational level, we defined entitlements as efforts to increase the responsibility attributed to an organization for an event. Spokespersons used entitlements by claiming that the favorable outcomes of an action would not have been realized without their organizations' members and often blended entitlements with enhancements. For example, after many groups had argued that changes in the "Midnight Caller" script were necessary, and after major script changes had occurred, ACT UP spokespersons claimed that those changes would not have occurred if their members had not disrupted the filming. ACT UP members also asserted that, without their protests, no ac-

⁶ Social movement theorists describe the negative and positive consequences of radicals and their actions for moderates as "radical flank effects" (cf. Haines, 1988).

tivists could have reviewed the script and even minor changes would not have been made. One reporter summarized his interviews with ACT UP spokespersons:

Several pointed out that without protests, the show might have been an even worse portrayal of the AIDS health crisis and gay life (White, 1988: 4).

Similarly, Earth First! spokespersons claimed that their members deserved credit for improving Earth First!'s relations with mill workers and law enforcement agencies despite negative propaganda by timber companies during the Redwood Summer protests:

While lumber company PR types and the corporate press were whipping up a frenzy of anticipation over the likelihood of violence, Redwood Summer organizers held meetings with timber company mill workers and law enforcement agencies, defusing tension and educating them about non-violence (*Earth First!*, 1990b: 1).

Similarly, ACT UP informants claimed that the success of the Louis Sullivan disruption was due in part to their use of an elaborate media network set up to communicate to the press and other media around the world. As one reporter put it,

The high-tech sophistication of ACT UP's media apparatus for this week's event is a telling illustration of just how far the group has come since its founding in New York three years ago (Tuller, 1990).

Entitlings were also used for events that were not enhanced, or where enhancements were weaker. For example, Earth First! spokespersons claimed that the harassment and negative reactions they received from corporations and law enforcement agencies only meant their protests had been effective. As Dave Foreman remarked about the alleged nuclear sabotage incident:

I'm proud to be here facing harassment by the FBI. I think I'm here because I've been effective in bringing attention to the crisis on the planet (Manes, 1990: 193).

Step 5: Organizational Legitimacy Is Acquired

The final step in our process model is the acquisition of legitimacy for organizations whose members carry out illegitimate actions. According to Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) conceptual work, legitimacy is acquired when there is endorsement and support for an organization from audiences that are crucial to the organization's reputation and viability. Positive statements by spokespersons of credible organizations, financial or technical support from outside constituents, and increased organizational membership for

ACT UP and Earth First! were all signs that legitimacy had been conferred. Tables 4 and 5 summarize the endorsement and support that followed each of the eight illegitimate events we examined. This evidence suggests that ACT UP and Earth First! spokespersons were often successful in their attempts to divert attention away from the negative aspects of the events through defenses of innocence and justifications and could then shift the focus of attention toward the more socially acceptable goals and accomplishments of the organizations through enhancements and entitlings.

External endorsement and support were sometimes directly tied to a particular illegitimate event. For example, a *San Francisco Examiner* editorial praised the changes that ACT UP brought about in the "Midnight Caller" script:

Thanks to the persistence of the activists . . . a few laudable messages are telegraphed to the audience (Dougan, 1988: C2).

A *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter described endorsements that Earth First! received for its Redwood Summer protests that were designed to save American trees and jobs:

The messages provoked blasts from the air horns of passing trucks . . . some of them accompanied by friendly thumbs up (Bancroft, 1990: A27).

More often, however, endorsement and support were linked to the culturally acceptable and legitimate goals of these organizations rather than to specific illegitimate events. For example, shortly after ACT UP members' disruption at St. Patrick's Cathedral, the *New York Times* printed a story lauding ACT UP's key role in hastening the availability of new AIDS drugs:

Another word that describes ACT UP is effective. Pressure by the group has not only helped keep the epidemic in the news, it has also helped bring major changes to the way the Federal Government tests and distributes experimental drugs, allowing patients to obtain them much faster (DeParle, 1990: A12).

Even New York City's health commissioner, Dr. Stephen C. Joseph, a former target of ACT UP's protests, expressed support for the organization:

There's no doubt that they've had an enormous effect, . . . we've basically changed the way we make drugs available in the last year (DeParle, 1990: A12).

Similarly, Earth First! was recognized as an effective force in the environmental movement in a *Los Angeles Times* story after the nuclear plant sabotage incident. Brock Evens, vice president for national issues at the Audubon Society, remarked:

I honor Earth First! for having the guts to do the things they do. It's not for me, but I understand why they do what they do. And ultimately we all help each other (Lerner, 1990: 10).

TABLE 4
Cross-event Evidence of Endorsement and Support for ACT UP Following
Illegitimate Events

Events	Evidence of Endorsement or Support
Disruption of "Midnight Caller" filming	<p>San Francisco's mayor praises the protestors and their goals (Ford, 1988)</p> <p>San Francisco mayor's press secretary endorses the action (Easton, 1988)</p> <p>"Midnight Caller" producers make initial amendments to the script and say they have heard "responsible viewpoints" from some of the protestors (Linebarger, 1988)</p> <p>Protestors from the San Francisco AIDS Foundations and the Mobilization Against AIDS join ACT UP in negotiations with "Midnight Caller" producers (<i>Los Angeles Times</i>, 1988)</p> <p>Several articles in San Francisco gay, lesbian, and other local newspapers endorse the actions of ACT UP (Cice, 1988; Marquadt, 1988a, b; Whelan, 1988)</p> <p>"Midnight Caller" crew members express empathy with the activists (Waltes & Morch, 1988)</p> <p>San Francisco television critic endorses the actions (Dougan, 1988)</p> <p>Bay area newspaper editorials endorse the actions and goals of ACT UP members (<i>San Jose Mercury News</i>, 1988; Kirp, 1988)</p>
Golden Gate Bridge shutdown	<p>San Francisco gay and lesbian newspaper gives "wholehearted" endorsement of the action (Marquadt, 1989)</p> <p>California congresswomen Barbara Boxer and Nancy Pelosi express empathy towards the protestors and endorse ACT UP's goals (Linebarger, 1989)</p> <p>Motorists honk in approval during one-year anniversary march (Ward, 1990)</p>
Disruption at St. Patrick's Cathedral	<p>Women's Health Action and Mobilization joins ACT UP in the protest (De Curtis, 1989)</p> <p>New York City mayor Ed Koch supports ACT UP's right to speak out about the AIDS crisis, despite his disagreement with the action itself (Reilly, 1989)</p> <p>Local gays and lesbians espouse support for the goals of ACT UP in New York newspaper article (Hunter & Servalen, 1989)</p> <p>AIDS journalists credit ACT UP with sharpening the focus on the AIDS crisis and with motivating new Food and Drug Administration and National Institute of Health programs to make AIDS drugs more available (Shilts, 1989)</p> <p>New York Times writer says ACT UP is effective in changing drug policy (DeParle, 1990)</p> <p>New York City health commissioner and the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease call ACT UP effective and constructive in changing drug policy (DeParle, 1990)</p>
Disruption of Louis Sullivan's speech at AIDS conference	<p>Delegates to the conference and a spokesperson from the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services endorse the action (Herscher & Olszewski, 1990)</p> <p>San Francisco paper prints editorial endorsing ACT UP and lauding its actions benefiting all people with AIDS (<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i>, 1990a)</p> <p>Federal health officials credit ACT UP with drug policy changes despite their controversial tactics (Liebert, 1990)</p> <p>Letters to the editor in San Francisco newspapers endorse the action (Dobson, 1990; McGuire, 1990)</p> <p>Spokespersons from the National Public Health Service and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease say they will retain ACT UP members on their boards after the incident (<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i>, 1990b)</p> <p>Informants from ACT UP report that office equipment loaned to them from private citizens enabled protests to continue during the conference</p> <p>Informants from ACT UP report a tripling in membership after the event</p>

TABLE 5
Cross-event Evidence of Endorsement and Support for Earth First!
Following Illegitimate Events

Events	Evidence of Endorsement or Support
Tree-spiking that led to injury of lumber worker	Newspaper article cites evidence of animal mutilations near the logging site and claims that police investigators suspected an individual cult member and not Earth First! (<i>Los Angeles Times</i> , 1987) The injured mill worker endorses Earth First!'s protests against clear-cutting in a telephone interview from his hospital bed. (Manes, 1990:12) Audubon Society spokesperson supports Earth First!'s defense of innocence (Scarce, 1990) Earth First! informants claim the event increased exposure and led to membership increases
Day of National Protest against the U.S. Forest Service	Earth First! informants reported that members of the Rain Forest Action Network and the Action Tree Council participated in and endorsed the actions Earth First! spokespersons claimed that media coverage pointed to inconsistencies between Forest Service policy and actions (Pickett, 1988) <i>Washington Post</i> article plays down the threat of Earth First! and gives credibility to their goals and protest questions (Sinclair, 1988)
Alleged rehearsal run for nuclear plant sabotage	Gerry Spence ^a provides pro bono legal support for Earth First! founder Dave Foreman, whom he claims was framed by the FBI (Diringer, 1989c) The FBI agent investigating the case praises Earth First! members for their dedication and effort in an accidentally recorded message (Bowden, 1990) Audubon Society vice president endorses Earth First!'s goals in a follow-up story (Lerner, 1990) Greenpeace publishes a sympathetic story concerning the incident (Berlet, 1990)
Redwood Summer protests and monkeywrenching	The Seeds of Peace and Brian Wilson of the San Francisco Center for the Practice of Nonviolence endorse the protests (Goldston, 1990) Some loggers in northern California express support for Earth First!'s goals of stopping clear-cutting and exporting logging jobs (Bancroft, 1990) California mainstream environmentalists and local northern California citizens express support for Earth First!'s goals (Diringer & Snyder, 1990) Support and participation in the protests by local ecologists (Kay, 1990) Over 2,000 demonstrators from across the state and nation show up for one protest (<i>Earth First!</i> , 1990d)

^a This support was notable because Spence was famous for winning the Kerr-McKee vs. Karen Silkwood estate case.

The eight illegitimate events also provoked criticisms for the organizations and their members. Evidence from newspapers, magazines, and informants revealed negative reactions to ACT UP's actions, including: (1) restraining orders following the "Midnight Caller" disruptions (Johnson, 1988; Peters, 1988), (2) criticisms by journalists following the Golden Gate Bridge shutdown (*New York Times*, 1989; Stanley, 1989; Tuller, 1990), (3) denouncement by religious and political leaders following the disruption at St. Patrick's Cathedral (Associated Press, 1989; Henican, 1989; Lindner, Anataki, & Stone, 1989; Shilts, 1989; Weiser, 1989), and (4) criticism after the disruption at the Sixth International Conference on AIDS (Carter, 1990; Liebert, 1990; O'Loane, 1990; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1990b).

Negative reactions to Earth First!'s actions included: (1) claims that Earth First!ers were trying to hurt loggers following the tree-spiking incident (Diringer, 1989a; Stammer, 1987), (2) tightened security at government offices following the national day of protest against the U.S. Forest Service (Pickett, 1988; Sinclair, 1988), (3) charges that Earth First!ers were terrorists following the nuclear plant sabotage incident (Diringer, 1989b; Feldman & Meyer, 1989; Foote, 1990), and (4) counterdemonstrations, harassment, and assaults on Earth First!ers following the Redwood Summer protests (Earth First!, 1990a,c; Garlington & Israel, 1990; Kay, 1990; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1990c,d).

These negative reactions do not, however, undermine our assertion that ACT UP and Earth First! acquired legitimacy following these illegitimate actions. Two trends in the data corroborated our assertion. The first trend is that the audiences that gave endorsement and support were distinct from those that gave criticism. As Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) suggested, because an organization need only be endorsed and supported by a limited segment of society, it can remain legitimate in the face of external attacks. Thus, if an illegitimate action triggers some attacks from audiences that are not crucial sources of endorsement and support but also triggers an outpouring of endorsement and support from crucial audiences, the organization connected with the action has acquired—rather than lost—legitimacy.⁷

Endorsement and support for ACT UP came primarily from other AIDS and gay activist groups, politicians and journalists in San Francisco and New York, and scientists and other AIDS experts. These audiences were more crucial to ACT UP's effectiveness and survival than were religious leaders, corporations, and journalists outside of San Francisco and New York, all of which provided criticisms. Endorsement and support for Earth First! came from other environmental organizations, environmental experts, and environmental journalists. These audiences were more important to Earth First!'s effectiveness and survival than the law enforcement officials, lumber industry spokespersons, and Forest Service employees who provided the bulk of the criticisms. Thus, it appears that both of these organizations acquired legitimacy following illegitimate events because attacks came largely from irrelevant audiences while endorsement and support came largely from relevant audiences.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that even though unlawful and sometimes dangerous actions were linked to these organizations, much of the endorsement and support for their goals came from individuals and groups in the mainstream of society, not just from a few radical groups and

⁷ Moreover, attacks by a hostile audience can increase an organization's legitimacy when individuals and groups that are crucial sources of endorsement and support for the organization reject the views of the hostile audience. These attacks may be viewed as a sign that the organization is doing something right. For example, criticisms of Earth First! by lumber company officials appeared to enhance this radical organization's reputation among members of more moderate environmental groups such as the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society.

individuals. For example, even though people throughout the San Francisco Bay Area were angry at ACT UP following the Golden Gate Bridge closings, a story printed three weeks later reported that local congresswomen Barbara Boxer and Nancy Pelosi expressed empathy for protestors who had contracted the HIV virus and support for ACT UP's goals. Similarly, expressions of support for Earth First!'s goals came from the Audubon Society, which is the oldest and most conservative environmental group in the United States, from the mill worker who was injured by the spiked tree, and even from one of the FBI agents who was investigating the alleged nuclear plant sabotage.

The second trend in these data suggesting the acquisition of organizational legitimacy after the illegitimate actions is that criticisms surfaced quickly in the media and focused on the illegitimate means used by members of ACT UP and Earth First!, but endorsement and support persisted after the criticisms had faded and focused on the legitimate ends these organizations sought to attain. We counted and dated all mentions of criticisms and of endorsements and support from organizational audience members in three mainstream newspapers that covered the eight events closely: the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *San Francisco Chronicle*. A total of 34 criticisms and 30 expressions of endorsement and support occurred in the 50 articles in these sources that concerned these eight events. These articles indicated that 79 percent of the criticisms (27 of 34) were reported within the first eight days after an event, and only 50 percent (15 of 30) of the endorsements and support came during the first eight days, with the remaining 50 percent coming after the eighth day. Thus, 64 percent of the reactions reported in the first eight days were negative, and 36 percent were positive. Conversely, 32 percent of the reactions reported after eight days were negative, and 68 percent were positive. In addition, 31 of 34 reported criticisms concerned illegitimate means, and only 3 concerned organizational ends. Conversely, all 30 expressions of endorsement and support concerned the organizations' more legitimate ends. For instance, after ACT UP's protest at St. Patrick's Cathedral, initial criticisms centered around the immorality of desecrating communion wafers; later endorsements focused on the effectiveness of ACT UP's tactics in changing drug policies. Likewise, after the nuclear sabotage incident, the terrorist nature of Earth First!'s actions was criticized at first, but the organization's goals and achievements in environmental preservation and education were ultimately praised. Thus, once the initial criticisms for the illegitimate means used by ACT UP and Earth First! had faded, the bulk of the remaining attention appeared supportive and focused on the legitimate ends that these organizations sought to achieve.

In summary, our model proposes that illegitimate actions by members of ACT UP and Earth First! were crucial first steps in a process that ultimately led to these organizations' acquiring legitimacy. As the *Los Angeles Times* summarized:

If Earth First! poses a murky moral dilemma of ends justifying means, on a practical level the group must be judged by its

effectiveness. There seems to be a growing, if somewhat tacit, consensus in environmental circles that, for all the trouble it has caused, Earth First! has had a positive impact (Lerner, 1990: 10).

BROADER IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

The model proposed here was induced from data about two radical social movement organizations. This model is most apt to generalize to other radical social movement organizations, but the extent to which it describes such organizations can only be determined by hypotheses testing research in large, representative samples. The strength of inductive research of this kind is in guiding and inspiring new ideas rather than validating existing ideas. In this vein, the model proposed here suggests several paths for future work that have implications beyond enhancing knowledge of radical social movement organizations. These broader implications include fueling insights about controversial actions associated with a wider range of organizations, providing a basis for testable propositions, and suggesting refinements in institutional and impression management theories.

Illegitimate Actions by Other Kinds of Organizations

The insight that social movement organizations use illegitimate actions to acquire legitimacy raises the question of whether other kinds of organizations also use illegitimate actions to gain or protect legitimacy. We examined cases of more traditional organizations that were associated with illegitimate or controversial actions to begin addressing this question. Our tentative conclusion was that the model is useful for understanding two kinds of situations in which illegitimate or controversial actions are associated with more traditional organizations.

First, the model appears to be useful for understanding how and why some traditional organizations may try to gain recognition or promote a new image by intentionally carrying out controversial actions that, although not unlawful, violate social norms. For example, Reebok International sponsored a controversial rock music tour supporting Amnesty International⁸ to promote Reebok's image as a "cool" and "with it" company (Carton, 1988). Reebok's management viewed such sponsorship as a way to promote Reebok's "freedom of expression campaign" (the slogan was "let U.B.U.") and a means to gain increased visibility with young people (Hiller & Quelch, 1988). Reebok's association with the tour created controversy because many saw it as a sleazy marketing ploy, by a company with no prior human rights activities, designed to sell expensive shoes to poor young people throughout the world (MacPhearson, 1988).

⁸ Amnesty International is a worldwide organization fighting for human rights, as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They specifically work for the release and fair trial of people imprisoned for their beliefs, gender, color, ethnic origin, language, or religion.

Reebok responded by noting that the tour was underwritten by the Reebok Foundation, which had been created a year earlier to aid worthy humanitarian and educational organizations (Carton, 1988). These claims were apparently intended to show that Reebok's retail sales business had been decoupled from its sponsorship of the tour and that Reebok had, prior to the tour, engaged in structural and procedural conformity by setting up a separate foundation to support such causes. In addition, the firm's chief executive and other Reebok spokespersons used defenses of innocence against the criticisms that the tour was purely a marketing ploy, claiming that it was not designed to sell shoes and dovetailed with Reebok's long-established stance on freedom of expression (Carton, 1988). Furthermore, they justified the event as morally correct even if it did sell shoes. As one spokesperson put it, "What's so controversial about human rights?" (Miller, 1988: 6). Thus, it appears that Reebok used decoupling and institutional conformity to add credibility to the organization and its spokespersons while distancing the controversial actions from the formal organization, setting the stage for justifications and defenses of innocence.

Second, the model appears useful for understanding how traditional organizations deal with controversy surrounding illegitimate actions that they become associated with unintentionally. Examples include the Johnson & Johnson corporation's predicament when several people died from poisoned Tylenol capsules (Snyder & Foster, 1983) and Waldenbooks' recall of *The Satanic Verses* after the corporation received bomb threats for selling this book.

These examples suggest that our model may provide insights about how the images of these organizations were managed. To illustrate, Waldenbooks was criticized by the National Writers Union after discontinuing sales of *The Satanic Verses*, considered blasphemous by Islamic fundamentalists. Authors and independent book store owners criticized and picketed Waldenbooks stores, claiming the chain was sending a message that freedom of speech meant little because "any credible threat can banish, if not ban, a book" (Stern, Smith, & Quelch, 1990: 3). Waldenbooks' management responded with defenses of innocence and references to procedural conformity. They claimed that Waldenbooks had never stopped selling the book, that it wasn't currently available to customers because it was temporarily sold out, and that the company was waiting for new shipments from the publisher. These claims were apparently accurate. Although Waldenbooks had pulled the book from store shelves, it was sold through company stockrooms. Thus, because Waldenbooks conformed to procedural norms about fighting censorship by keeping controversial books available through their stockrooms, spokespersons' later defenses of innocence were more believable. In addition, Waldenbooks issued a newspaper statement that justified the removal of *The Satanic Verses* from store shelves because of concern for employee safety and claimed that their employees were entitled to praise for working despite bomb threats (Quelch, 1990). Thus, Waldenbooks used de-

fenses of innocence, justifications, and entitlements, and used procedural conformity to set the stage for those tactics, even though they did not intentionally create the event that caused the controversy.

Developing Testable Propositions

These examples of organizational associations with controversial actions suggest that some of the conceptual links in our model might be tested not only in a large, representative sample of radical social movement organizations, but also in more diverse samples of organizations. Our model and supporting data suggest four propositions that might be especially promising for such empirical adventures.

First, the model suggests that decoupling may set the stage for later impression management tactics. In our discussion of defenses of innocence in step 3 of the proposed model, we described how ACT UP and Earth First! used separate affinity groups or anonymous members to carry out actions and how this decoupling facilitated spokespersons' later claims that their organizations were not responsible for the actions. Similarly, Reebok decoupled its sponsorship of the rock tour from shoe sales by using a separate foundation to run the tour. If decoupling had not been in place, spokespersons' later defenses of innocence concerning the marketing benefits of the tour would not have been as credible. The implication is the following:

Proposition 1: When a formal organization is structurally decoupled from members' illegitimate or controversial actions, spokespersons' subsequent use of defenses of innocence for those actions will be more successful in helping their organizations acquire legitimacy than they will be when such decoupling is not present.

Second, the model suggests that procedural conformity may set the stage for subsequent justifications. For example, ACT UP spokespersons reminded reporters of their prior attempts to hold peaceful negotiations with the producers of the "Midnight Caller" television show when justifying their disruption of the filming. ACT UP spokespersons claimed the disruption was a last resort after institutionally normative actions failed to bring about the changes necessary to prevent further violence against people with AIDS. Because procedural conformity was followed in carrying out this and other actions, spokespersons could more easily make claims to the effect that "We had a good reason, we only carried it out after all legitimate possibilities were exhausted." The implication is:

Proposition 2: When an organization engages in procedural conformity by attempting to carry out legitimate actions before resorting to illegitimate actions, spokespersons' subsequent use of justifications for those illegitimate actions will be more successful in helping their organizations acquire legitimacy than they will be if such procedural conformity is not evident.

Third, the model suggests that personnel conformity (Scott, 1987) sets the stage for certain kinds of justifications. We found that spokespersons may justify actions on the basis of other credible actors' performance or endorsement of similar actions. If credible actors are organization members, their endorsement adds legitimacy to the justifications used to defend illegitimate actions. Earth First! spokespersons often asserted that their philosophy of deep ecology was developed largely by Bill Devall, a sociologist and deep ecology "prophet." By retaining Devall as an advisor, Earth First! spokespersons gained credibility for their justifications of illegitimate actions. Similarly, many ACT UP members were on the boards of the Public Health Service and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, and these individuals lent credibility to the organization's claims that inaction would cost thousands of lives. These data suggest a third proposition:

Proposition 3: When organizations employ credible personnel by retaining members who are experts in their fields, spokespersons' subsequent use of justifications for illegitimate actions endorsed by such experts will be more successful in helping the organizations acquire legitimacy than they will be if experts had not been retained and had not endorsed illegitimate actions.

These first three propositions suggest that decoupling and institutional conformity make the subsequent use of impression management tactics more credible. The model also suggests links between different types of impression management tactics. Our data suggest that impression management tactics proceed from those that shift attention away from negative means to those that shift attention toward positive ends. If this shift is accomplished, organizations can use impression management to enhance and entitle those positive ends. If attention is not shifted to positive ends and is still focused on negative means, enhancements and entitlings are less likely to be effective in bringing about endorsement and support from crucial organizational audiences. Thus,

Proposition 4: When spokespersons are successful in using defenses of innocence and justifications to shift attention away from the negative means and toward the positive ends of illegitimate actions, their subsequent use of enhancements and entitlings for those actions will be more successful in helping their organizations acquire legitimacy than they will be when defenses of innocence and justifications fail to create such a shift in attention.

Refining Institutional and Impression Management Theories

This research has implications for the separate developments of institutional and impression management perspectives, not just implications for combining these two perspectives. First, our findings bolster recent efforts to broaden institutional theory conceptions of individual self-interest in organ-

izations. Institutional theorists have commonly deemphasized the role of self-interest and instead emphasized the role of social norms and institutionally defined structures and strategies when describing determinants of organizational form and function. Recently, however, such theorists have begun to recognize how individual actors influence institutions. DiMaggio (1988) described institutionalization as a political process in which the relative power of actors shapes the form of the resulting institution. Covaleski and Dirsmith (1988) proposed that individual actors in universities may influence the creation and maintenance of institutional expectations regarding policies and procedures in ways that meet their individual needs.

In this vein, our model emphasizes that, in loosely coupled organizations like ACT UP and Earth First!, individuals may influence when and how institutional norms are adhered to and when and how such norms are violated. We suggest that some actors influenced decisions to adhere to particular institutional norms at specific times in specific ways, while other actors influenced decisions to violate different institutional norms at specific times in specific ways. Organizational spokespersons may influence and practice adherence to institutionalized norms concerning structures or practices in order to legitimize their roles, meet personal needs for power and leadership, and facilitate the future use of justifications and defenses of innocence that may legitimize their organizations and themselves. In contrast, other, more radical members may influence and practice the violation of institutionalized norms concerning behavior for legitimate organizations. They do so to gain attention for their organizations and themselves, to gain a sense of personal power, and to gain legitimacy for their organizations and themselves with audiences that support such illegitimate actions.

This research contributes to work on impression management in two ways. First, although a substantial body of empirical work has begun to examine impression management at the individual level in organizations (cf. Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989, 1991), less work has examined impression management intended to preserve and enhance organizational images. This study adds to the small number of quantitative studies of attributions that have appeared in annual reports to corporate shareholders (Salancik & Meindl, 1984; Staw, McKechnie, & Puffer, 1983) and qualitative field studies (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Sutton & Callahan, 1987) suggesting that organizations and individuals have used strategies similar to those we have described to protect their images, to similar effect.

Second, this research has a longitudinal component that is typically absent from social psychological theory and research on impression management. As Ginzler, Kramer, and Sutton (1992) pointed out, this longitudinal component is missing because the impression management literature consists mostly of brief laboratory studies. The present research indicates that by introducing a longitudinal component, spokespersons may transform events that seem at first to be identity-threatening into events that ultimately protect and perhaps enhance an organization's image. Research might benefit from examining how and if similar transformations in individual images

occur. In a related vein, little is known about the consequences of using different sequences of specific impression tactics. Our research suggests that, if defenses of innocence and justifications do transform organizational events from identity-threatening to identity-enhancing, then spokespersons can make successful use of entitlings and enhancements. Impression management research, including laboratory experiments, could examine whether such sequencing occurs and if it has a similar impact on individual images.

CONCLUSIONS

This article advances a process model describing how the illegitimate actions attributed to members of social movement organizations can ultimately lead to the acquisition of organizational legitimacy. It describes how spokespersons for two such organizations used accounts that included references to organizational structures and procedures to shape how external constituencies interpreted members' illegitimate actions. Our analyses of eight illegitimate events linked to ACT UP and Earth First! suggest a process in which spokespersons' impression management tactics actively shape constituencies' interpretations of illegitimate events and in which references to organizational design features, described in institutional theories, set the stage for spokespersons' use of these tactics by increasing the credibility of the interpretations that they put forward.

The primary conceptual contribution of this research is that it identifies specific links between institutional and impression management theories, thus taking an initial step toward integrating two perspectives that emphasize how people present favorable images to others. This research also suggests a broader, and rather unsavory, conclusion that might generalize to other settings: individuals, groups, and organizations that seek to gain legitimacy from their peers might accomplish this aim by first violating the norms held by their peers. The notion that, in order to persuade people to like you, your group, or your organization, you might start by taking actions designed to offend those people has troubling but intriguing implications for both theory and practice.

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